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ABSTRACT

The anthology by Jesse Perry, "Reading Ladders for Human Relations," constructed of a blend of best literary works, was compiled based on the conviction that reading selected books would increase the social sensitivity of young people and play a unique role in fostering better human relationships. Its main purposes are expressed in the section titles: creating a positive image, living with others, appreciating different cultures, and coping with change. A large portion of its introductory material is devoted to suggestions for the use of books with young people. The suggested activities are based on four assumptions: (1) all forms of literature are effective media for preserving, transmitting, and improving our society and its multiculture; (2) liking and trusting others can increase as we share their feelings through literature; (3) transfer of learning is possible from books to real life; and (4) parents, teachers, and librarians would want to use various approaches in helping young people to understand and to value themselves. Discussed in the introductory material are methods and approaches to encourage children to share their reading experience, to create interest in books, to motivate activities, and to deepen understanding. (AW)

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REFLECTIONS OF LIFE THROUGH BOOKS

> Literature is a mirror by which man is reflected; therefore, it is through books that one might gain knowledge about people who live in another county, in another community or whose ethnic or cultural background may be different from one's own.

Jesse Perry's introductory statement in the newest edition of Reading Ladders for Human Relations defines the philosophy under which it was written and sets the purpose for its use. The four themes of the "Ladders" were evolved from a strong conviction that books would increase the social sensitivity of young people and play a unique role in fostering better human relationships. The titles speak for themselves. Creating a Positive Self Image, Living with Others, Appreciating Different Cultures, and Coping with Change, all deal with the basic realization that experiences, backgrounds, and understandings mold one's life style and the life styles of others.

Fine sounding themes in themselves have little value no matter how seriously they were developed or how rigorously they are identified in the many hundreds of books selected. The themes in Reading Ladders will help young people reach the height of concern for others of which they are capable only if they are used.

The Reading Ladders are structurally sound, const ucted of a blend of the best material found in literature. Literature sturdy enough to withstand the test of time and yet flexible enough to be adaptable to new ideas and problems as well as many facets of today's human condition. These are also ladders that can be extended to lift young people to greater heights of understanding and

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sensitivity for their fellow man, and they come in different sizes so that the youngest child and the most mature of readers will find satisfying themes and steps spaced to meet his particular needs. The ladders are planted on firm ground. The themes they encompass are universal ones with success and failure, joy and sorrow, problems that can be solved and those seemingly "unsolvable" included. They correspond directly to those aspects of awareness which are the basis for understanding of self and appreciation of others. Many young readers' first steps up the ladder of understanding are most difficult but their first venture into the world of books need not be as uncertain and traumatic. Children can be led to the satisfactions that come from reading surely and steadily by the team of parents, teachers, and librarians who work with and know both children and books. We cannot assume all children are reading or want to read or even recognize the the values to be found in books. James Baldwin had already discovered books when he wrote:

> I was looking in books for a bigger world in which I lived. In some blind and instinctive way, I knew what was happening in those books was also happening all around me. And I was trying to make a connection between the books and the life I saw and the life I lived.

Reading Ladders for Human Relations has been designed to help those who like James Baldwin need to "make the connection" between books and their lives. A large portion of its introductory material is devoted to suggestions for the use of books with young people. Its goal is to expand and deepen their knowledge, understanding and attitudes toward human relationships through experiences with books.

There are four assumptions on which the suggested activities are based:

1. All forms of literature, particularly books, are effective media for preserving, transmitting, and improving our society and its multi-cultures.

The vicarious encounters with problems of self-understanding and acceptance of others through books serves as a bridge between what is and what ought to be. Today's young people can be introduced through literature to the human condition that is shaped and directed by the culture in which they live. Children can be motivated to see, hear, and read more, explore new interests and tackle new problems through books.

2. Liking and trusting others can increase as we share their feelings through literature.

James Kerber states in his section of Reading Ladders that "perhaps the greatest contribution and difference between books of today and those of other times is the difference of how they solve the problems of life." The earlier tendency was to dispose neatly of every issue or contention among people or values; this is no longer true. The job of today's author is not to solve children's problems, but help children become aware that considerable feelings of tension arise whenever human beings make decisions. Through literature children get the chance to participate in the lives of others as well as their own.

3. Transfer of learning is possible from books to "real" life.

The basic needs identified by May Hill Arbuthnot in Children and Books are common to all people and to all times. The young child's needs are quite personal but gradually extend to include a wider society. The child in seeking to satisfy both personal and societal needs can find help in books both directly and indirectly. Those books that most vividly portray emotions and situations universally experienced by a growing child will help him to "make the connection" between books and life.

4. Parents, teachers, and librarians will want to use various approaches in helping young people to understand and to value themselves.

Robert Whitehead in Children's Literature: Strategies of Teaching stresses that a love of literature in young people is developed through good books, a well-defined literature program, and knowledgeable teachers. The teacher may well be the key but she functions best when supported by parents and librarians who together help her plan programs, provide time and books for reading, and initiate activities designed to show children that reading can be an enjoyable and rewarding experience.

There are innumberable ways of working with young people and books. The team that produced Reading Ladders combined their respective talents to offer its readers a multitude of suggested activities that would bring children to books and thus nearer to the realities of life those books frequently reflect. Sister Dorothy MacDougall and this writer collected ideas for presenting books that reflect the social insensitivity apparent today in our culture. Books can -- and do -- have their influence in helping young people to be more aware of the social problems and conflicts all about them. When authors sensitively portray the strengths and weaknesses of man, the message comes through. The teacher's task is to help the one who has read the book to crystalize his own ideas and when appropriate to share his insights with others. The content of some books may be too personal to share but most young people do enjoy activities through which they convey their thoughts and feelings with others.

Books May Be Shared In Many Ways

Children can frequently interest others in books they found most enjoyable and both will profit from the experience. A young child who has read Evan's Corner by Hill, for example, might share the story by means of a flannel board

presentation. The need for Evan to share his time with his younger brother when explained to others by a reader multiplies the power of the story. Drawing a picture helps young readers fix in their minds the things they learned about other cultures as in Did You Carry the Flag Today, Charlie? by Caudill.

Older children who have read the same book may want to share their views during a panel discussion. A group may want to read The Young Unicorns by L'Engle and discuss the thematic importance of free will. An entire section on discussion compiled by Iris Tiedt and Maude Edmundson has been included in the 5th edition of Reading Ladders. In it they define the purpose of discussion generally as promoting growth in a student's ability to listen, to think, and to speak, for effective discussion cannot exist without a combination of these three skills. They suggest students can recognize reasons for discussing to persuade or solve a problem, to exchange opinions, to share ideas, and to release strong feelings.

Two methods of grouping for discussion are listed. The large group of thirty where students exchange ideas about a topic of general interest such as the ideas in Krumgold's And Now Miguel. For maximum participation and involvement, however, they recommend small groups of three to six with its increased opportunity for each to speak and share ideas as they question and answer informally.

Discussion can be encouraged and inquiry, judgment, and interpretation of literature strengthened when provocative questions are used as stimulants to student involvement and interaction. Encouraging young people to express many points of view will move them beyond the obvious facts to critically examining situations and perhaps develop deeper insight into the problems of human relationships contained in both their books and their lives.

At times an individual child has read books that deal with a particular social phenomena and they "must" be shared in an oral report. He might compare the reaction of the young American girl to the death of her brother in Home From

Far by Little with the Japanese boy's reaction to the death of his parents in Pearl Buck's The Big Wave. The cultural differences are there but overshadowed by the universal feelings concerning life and death.

Children might indicate whether they understood the social implications of Frances's behavior through presentation of a puppet show of Hoban's A Baby Sister for Frances. Family relationships are beautifully delineated in this and other Frances picture story books. Mock radio presentations could focus on books which use diaries, journals, or letters to help develop the plot. Feelings toward war could be studied after reading Across Five Aprils, and the notebook of Harriet the Spy by Fitzhugh could be examined for its underlying references to modern society. A make-believe TV can be the setting for encouraging social awareness through a critical reaction to books. Let's Be Enemies by Janice May Udry could be both enjoyable and thought-provoking.

For many children involvement with books, getting "into" a story truly happens only when they act it out. Donald Bissett's contribution to the front matter of the new edition is entitled "From literature to drama to life" and in it he discusses creative dramatics in which he suggests the acting out of a scene from a story is perhaps the most common form of using dramatics with literature. He suggests:

> In order to act out a scene well, a child must think and talk and act like a character in a story. He must make the story situation real to himself. When children act out scenes from books, the scenes can no longer lay flat on the page, they must come to life.

The processes involved in planning and playing scenes are exercises in trying to feel and be, momentarily someone else. A scene is discussed in order to play it and becomes the potential for a more active response to literature, trying on different roles and discussing human problems.

In order for teachers to use creative dramatics effectively, there are several procedures Dr. Bissett urges they should follow. Scenes should be chosen

that act out well with vivid or clear cut characters around whom the action revolves. Particularly when children are first dramatizing they need interesting characters to stimulate their imagination and that are understandable to them. Stories to act out must have action that the players are able to show; easy to imagine and transfer into dialogue and movement, for characters should be able to show how they feel not just talk about their feelings. The story that dramatizes a basic human problem or predicament is a story that presents opportunities for children to grow in understanding of other people and themselves.

Creativity in written book reports might be an alternative to creative dramatics. A report based on the point of view of a minor character in the story reveals much of the reader's knowledge of the human relationships involved. A letter written from one character to another in a story will reveal these same insights. If there is a class newspaper, a regular column may feature the comparison of books with similar themes. The realistic Shadow of a Bull by Wojciechowska and the book of fantasy, The Gammage Cup by Kendall, could be compared, for they treat in quite different ways, the idea of non-conformity. Which book makes the point more strongly?

Young people may turn to creative writing in order to respond to a book. The problem in a story can be looked at through the eyes of a character who seems unpleasant, unkind or even dishonest. The action in Ward's book Ollie, Ollie Oxen-Free might be described by Ollie's father. The reader would then perhaps be less harsh in his judgments of this man who failed so frequently in his duties as a father. For young people to gain sensitivity toward characters who seem so insensitive to others is a big step upward on the ladder of human relations.

Creating Interest in Books

Examining the ways books may be shared presupposes that young people do read. Far too many children grow to adulthood without ever experiencing the thrill of

becoming truly "lost" in a book that is impossible for them to put down. In some homes and classrooms, however, we must begin with a variety of efforts to create even an initial interest in books. The adult who knows and loves good books can do much to foster this interest. People of all ages love to hear a good story. An endless supply of stories for such telling may be found in traditional literature. Most of these have come down to us through many generations of story-tellers. Fortunately, most public librarians and many school librarians keep the art alive in their storytelling sessions.

There are books that cry out to be read aloud! The number of adults who practice this art is much greater than the number of storytellers. Teachers and librarians who read aloud to their students in the upper elementary grades and in high school or have encouraged students to read to younger children are creating bonds with books that might otherwise never develop.

Book-talks are another way of recommending books to children and Elizabeth Morse shares her views in a section of Reading Ladders. The sharing of a number of books related to a particular theme or topic is one of the most effective ways of introducing books, encouraging reading, motivating action and deepening human understanding. There are many approaches and treatments of the book talk but the more formal ones generally develop around special themes or by similar components such as characters, incidents or settings or by a single title explored in some depth or compared to other writers.

Much preparation is necessary for a successful book talk so that the speaker can just talk about the books and not be unnerved by unexpected responses and in fact encourages comments and questions.

The world of verbal symbols is a complicated one, and the mind and imagination need concrete stimuli to keep them operating enthusiastically. It would seem that nothing could be a bigger boon to the reading interests of young people than

meeting the authors and illustrators of books that have become their favorites. It is nice to know why an author wrote his various books and to get some hints as to what his next book will be about!

If an author cannot be present, the next-best choice might be a film in which the writer tells about his books or his reasons for writing them. A book can come alive in an animated version on the screen or be enhanced by a series of pictures and a musical background along with the narration. Records, audio tapes, and now video tapes, are another way of bringing young people and authors and illustrators "together." An attractive bulletin board will frequently catch the eye -- and interest -- of young people if it arouses their curiosity about an adventure, a character, or a particular time and place in history.

Much can be done to help young readers appreciate the best of what has been written for them, but at the same time adults must listen, observe, and learn about the young people's interests. A basic honesty is called for, and we must be ready with reasons when making an effort to broaden interests in books that include realistic stories, social problems of the past and present, science fiction and fantasy. In a world where facts are in such demand, many young people seem to be ignoring fantasy. Facts, not dreams, are important for a computer-age. But do young readers not need to be led to see that fantasy shows the truth by exploring the why of things? Who can read The Forgotten Door by Key, or Leonard Wibberley's Journey to Untor, or The Little Prince by de Saint-Exupery and not be affected by the message they convey? For this nation, the how is much more readily answered than the why. Works which engage the imagination -- and so frequently the heart -- of the reader, may be the books which give hope for the future!

If it is true that books can influence children only if they give them delight, then a further role of teachers, librarians, and others concerned with such influence would be to make sure that children have the opportunity to be delighted.

Time for reading just for enjoyment should be set aside daily. Some discussion of the various types of books will be important so that children will know what criteria to apply in judging a book's quality. Young people will begin to see what delights them and why this is so.

One of the elements that delights young people of all ages is the illustration of books. Patricia Cianciolo has contributed a section to Reading Ladders entitled "What Can the Illustrations Offer?" and states that if the goal of our publication is to facilitate understanding of one's self and others through literature and the impact of illustrations (and text) is known to be intense and subjective -- then we must select books with certain characteristics of illustration in mind.

She discusses variety in styles of illustrations for individuals vary in their appreciation. Realistic styles whether photographs, woodcuts, or other art forms can be interpreted by children in many ways.

Illustrations should facilitate identification -- childlike but not naive or condescending. Pictures must radiate sincere human emotions, warmth and joy.

Illustrations help self-concept and the visual message transmitted helps the viewer to determine this and Dr. Cianciolo uses many examples to verify this point.

Finally illustrations extend the child's worlds -- introduce him to the bigger world James Baldwin was seeking in books -- A "picture is a window" through which readers may learn about others who live in different environments.

When children examine books more closely and critically, the books begin to have a deeper influence; and the young readers can show their increased awareness of human relationships through debating social issues raised in books, seeing human problems in historical context, or discussing problems related to technological change, poverty, minority groups, war and peace.

A Team Effort is Required

Children are not born knowing the many opportunities that are theirs for the taking, and this includes opportunities with books. It is possible for a child to get to school without ever having encountered a book, but there are enough concerned adults around to make sure that a child does not move through our schools without a meaningful introduction to some of the best books available to him. Having parents, librarians, teachers, and other significant adults in the child's world working as a team to get young readers and books together would be an ideal approach.

Others members of this "let's read" team may include school guidance counselors, reading resource people, bookstore personnel, and leaders of youth organizations. These special people "know ways of whetting the appetite for good reading of all types." If the members of this team will make an increasing effort to know the best of books for young people, then we can indeed offer the best that we know in these many ways of working with books.

Many of you know Margery Williams', The Velveteen Rabbit. One paragraph in it seems most relevant to the use of books as a mirror of reality. The Rabbit has asked the Skin Horse "what is real?" and whether it hurt or happened all at once and the Skin Horse answered "It doesn't happen all at once, you become, it takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily or have sharp edges or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all because once you are Real, you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

The children for whom and with whom we work are also becoming. It's up to us to see that they have a wealth of books that don't break easily in the literary sense, no sharp edges of style to get "caught" on or that have content that

lacks meaning and relevancy for young people and have to be carefully kept. Perhaps we need to offer children books whose covers become tattered from reading and rereading, whose spines get weak from much opening to a favorite section or picture and whose pages are sometimes loose from use. But these things don't matter at all to the child and shouldn't matter to us for once books become Real for a child he loves them and looks for more. Books are thought of as useless only by those who don't understand; by children who have never been invited to take the first step on the ladder to understanding.

If literature is indeed the mirror that reflects what is real we must continue through every avenue available to encourage young people to "make the connection" between books and life. The 5th edition of Reading Ladders for Human Relations presents the means. . . .

Reflections of Life Through Books

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